

Arlington Students Trip to Nagaokakyo 2009 - Essays

2009 APS students trip to Nagaokakyo (July 6- July 15, 2009)

Students' essays

(Grade is as of 2009 September)

Shaira Ali (8th grade)

Nagaokakyo was an amazingly breathtaking place! I loved every minute of the nine days I spent there, and I wished I could spend longer; the people I met there and the memories I made with them will never be replaced.

My favorite place was the Komyoji temple; I especially loved our kind and surprisingly english-fluent tour guide and the beautiful tea gardens...I wish I could have gotten some time to draw the beautiful scenes, but fortunately I took loads of pictures! I really loved the Sushi-go-Round...me and my friends ate 35 plates! :)

The host families (yes, I had two) were exceedingly welcoming and wonderful! They didn't speak loads of English, but I knew some Japanese games, and they knew some English games, so we played games A LOT. But it was loads of fun.

At the end of the visit, I felt like I was leaving my family, because, for a little more than a week, they were.

Rita Kambil (8th grade)

My trip to Japan was one of the best experiences of my life, and Japan is the best place I have ever been in my life. The sites we visited were the most beautiful places I have ever seen, especially the Buddhist temple. The decorations were very intricate and just amazing. I just loved it so much. Also, the food was delicious. The sushi was 100 times better than here (obviously) and trying all the new food was a great experience. I really enjoyed the tempura udon and yakisoba. I loved the food so much, that I have started cooking Japanese food for my family at home.

My host family made my stay in Japan so much better than I had hoped. They were so nice, and even though they didn't speak much English and most of our communication was through a pocket translator, we were still very close. Every day they helped me learn more Japanese, and it really enhanced the learning experience. Saki and Kanna, 16 and 19, spoke English pretty well, and most nights one of them would help me with katakana and hiragana. They also taught me a few useful words. Kazuyo, my host mother, spoke barely any English, but we still had very good and interesting conversations through hand gestures and the translator. I really hope I will be able to see them again, and every day I practice hiragana and katakana so I will be able to show them what I have learned.

Visiting the schools was one of the best parts of Japan. The schools were so much better than the schools here, the elementary schools had POOLS!!! I had a great time sitting in on the classes, and I learned how to write my name in kanji during the calligraphy class. When we visited the junior high school, I was able to see one of the girls who stayed at my house when the Japanese exchange students visited Arlington. The junior high school brass band club played us several musical numbers which were the equivalent of the high school band or even the high school jazz band! I also was able to make new friends during the gym class at the junior high, even though we weren't able to talk much. I helped them when they had questions about English, and they helped me when I had questions about Japanese.

Louise Tanner (8th grade)

The exchange trip to Japan was an amazing experience for me, and for everyone else on the trip. I enjoyed being with my friends, and meeting new people. Japan is a beautiful country, full of art and culture. On the trip, we were lucky to experience these cultures, and admire the art. The temples and shrines that we visited were all breathtakingly beautiful.

I learned that even with language barriers, you can communicate and share cultures with many people from different parts of the world. Quickly sketching an object in a notebook can be a good way to communicate things you don't know how to say. Everyone was kind and accepting, and helpful as they could be. If there was the slightest discomfort, then they would do everything in their power to help.

Homesickness was really not an issue for most of the group, because as long as you have a few good friends with you, you don't think about how far away you are, and if you do get homesick, your friends really help. Japan is truly a completely different place, and its better to try to enjoy it while you're there, and "get into it," instead of dwelling on missing your home, and how strange everything is.

For those who are wondering, a laptop is not necessary. I brought my laptop, and ended up only using it on the plane. (It was a good source of entertainment, because I brought a few movies. With a bit of negotiating, you can sit with all of your friends and all watch a movie. If you are intending to do this, you should bring an ear bud splitter and ear buds. You are not allowed to bother the people around you by using the computer speakers.) If you want to communicate with your real family over Internet, ask to use your hosts' computer. A webmail like Gmail or Ymail (Google or Yahoo mail) is very convenient for the purpose of checking email from anywhere. If you do decide to bring a computer, remember a plug adapter. Without an adapter, you can't charge your computer, and it becomes useless.

iPods are also a good form of airplane entertainment, but remember to value family interaction over electronics. You can listen to your iPod at night during the trip, but don't use your iPod when you can be interacting with your family.

Lastly, try new things! If you travel all the way to Japan, you need to get out of your "comfort zone" and try things you would never think of doing in America. Go ahead and eat a creepy looking fish, even if you think you will hate it. You're going to find new things you like and don't like, so go all out and try everything. Even if some cultures seem strange, try them out! Who knows, most things are more fun than they seem!

Jasmina Coggins (9th grade)

Japan. What a place. A rich cultural buffet, treating your senses to traditions preserved exquisitely over the centuries, and new technology much more advanced than our own. One of the most tradition valuing countries you'll ever see. For one so small, Japan is an astounding place. The temples, the shopping, the ceremonies, and, did I mention the shopping? Yeah, that's Japan for you. My idea of heaven.

Three words that came to my content mind the most? *I'm in heaven.* Those words were the first thing that entered my mind after we got into the main part of the airport outside customs.

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Despite the jet-lagged, sleep deprived state of me and my friends (well, mostly my friends. I slept on the plane. And I sleep deep.), we were simply amazed by the array of new things. And the first thing we all took a picture of? My friend Shaira posing in front of a coke advertisement. Sure, it was the same annoying coke ad as back home, but it was *in Japan*. Thus, it was way better.

Although I didn't get to try some foods I wanted to, although I didn't get to go to the amusement park and the onsen, this was most definitely number one on my list of awesome trips. I'm not quite sure what was my favorite memory. I enjoyed almost everything (monkey park not included, I did not enjoy that so much)I did. I loved shopping in Kyoto, where I got my yukata (which I can't figure how to put on still) and really enjoyed hanging out with my host family. The parties were fun too! I loved hanging out with the school kids.

But I think my favorite memory was at my host families house, where we had a party after the goodbye party. Just hanging out with my friends, from Arlington and Nagaokakyo alike, it just felt like nothing bad could ever happen again. How should I describe it? I'm not one for cheesy writing, but I felt like even if we got separated or even one of us died, we'd still be together forever. And we still are.

Abigail Fowler (9th grade)

I'm really worried about writing this essay. I want to explain how amazing, just incredibly life changing this trip has been, but the feeling I left Japan with is impossible to describe. It's a feeling of discovering yourself, by being out of your own element. It's a feeling that you've discovered how huge the world is, that there are so many worlds inside the whole world that it is impossible to live in all of them. It's a feeling of finding a second home, another side to your heart. It's knowing that you've taken a step into someone else's life. And of course, a feeling of overwhelming gratitude, to the people who showed you there is more to the world than just your universe.

Every culture is different. But everywhere, you discover that overall, the human race is bonded. Anger and happiness and sadness and regret, can happen anywhere, and happen everywhere. The meaning of family and love will always be the same. Connecting like that with people on the other side of the world is an overwhelming feeling. I'll never forget it, and I'll never be able to describe it.

Robert Harrelson (9th grade)

When I was first waiting to get on the first plane in Logan Airport, I had no idea what to expect. Looking back on that day, it seems as if it happened much longer ago than two weeks. It feels like it all happened ages ago, part of which because I have readjusted to America. I still have not overcome jetlag, but its getting better. This program connects our two different cultures, cultures that can learn from each other and are not as different as one might think. This program helped me understand not only Japanese culture, but also how other people see our own culture.

The first thing I would like to write about is how our school systems compare to each other's. In Japan, for example, the students have longer school days than us. Takuma goes to Jr. High School, and he arrives at school at 8:30 am and leaves at 4:00 pm, with an hour of physical exercise from 3:00 to 4:00. At my school, we arrive at 7:55 am, and school starts around 8:07 am. Then we have school from 8:07 am until around 2:25 pm, including physical activity and other classes such as art and music. Also, we only have Physical Education twice a

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week, while they have physical activity every day. I played a bit of soccer with them, and they were all at the level of the better players on my team, probably B level minimum. Note: Arlington soccer is divided into 4 divisions, A, B, C, and D, A being the best.

While in their classrooms, I saw mostly memorization teaching methods being used, basically the students just have to memorize the facts and be able to repeat them. I ended up talking with Takuma about this at home one time, and he said that they do not do much in the way of discussion in classes. I pointed out that this worked well for math, and that math in Japan was better than in America. He said he thought it would be good to discuss things more in language class, such as discussing books and poetry as apposed to only learning facts about them.

On a note of visiting the schools, everyone seemed happy (well, as happy as one can be when they have to be in school), and were very kind and polite not only to us but to their teachers as well. It seemed like a very good atmosphere for learning, and I can assume that it works well for Japan. People in Japan seem more dedicated to learning than Americans, but they are also relaxed about it (although I bet not right before exams). In fact, the general atmosphere around school is roughly the same as it is in America. Interacting with the Japanese students was a lot of fun, and their cooking class cooks tastier food than ours does!

In a Japanese elementary school that we visited, the way that their classes work is that every so often one of their classes is substituted for "games", in which they go to their gym and play mostly physical games. We played competitive rock, paper, scissors, "Mr. Wolf what time is it?" and I had a lot of fun. In a junior high school, we got to play volleyball with a girls' gym class, and we had a great time doing that as well. In the high schools I tried Japanese archery (which is much harder for me than American archery), origami, and then at the second high school we played water polo, which turns out to be much harder than it looks. I was glad that the students let us stand on the bottom; in normal water polo apparently you are not allowed to stand on the bottom! Next, I would like to write about all the beautiful places that we went in Japan during the trip.

The first temple we visited was the Komyoji temple, and it was one of the best places on the trip. When I stepped inside, I naturally felt calm, even outside walking on the temples paths was calming. It is one of the most beautiful places that I have ever been, and I want to return to it someday. It was wonderful. Words cannot exactly capture the feeling, but the closest I can come is that it makes you feel at home, and it makes you want to love it. That place is amazing. Absolutely amazing. They also had a very kind English-speaking monk there, and she taught us how to drink tea. She explained that the Buddha that they worshipped there was the Amida Buddha, which is the Buddha that teaches enlightenment by enlightening others. I personally thought the concept of the Amida Buddha was interesting, as he understood that it was very hard for one person alone to achieve enlightenment, and therefore he tried to earn enlightenment for everyone.

Right after that, we went to the sushi go round, which literally was a conveyer belt that had little plates of sushi going around on it. You literally plucked whichever plate of sushi you wanted off of the belt, and it was priced based on what the design of the plate was. It was a good thing that it was all paid for ahead of time, because our table ate 34 plates of sushi! It was delicious. After that amazing lunch, we visited Nagaokatenmangu shrine, where the head priest was kind enough to perform a ritual for us that asked for the kami to favor us and help us. Personally, I thought that this was very kind of him.

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The last place that we visited that day was Yoshimine temple, whose Buddha appears to be depicted crying in the statues that I saw. At the end of the tour, I got to try some holy water. It did not taste any different from normal spring water. The next two days we visited elementary schools, and I greatly enjoyed that.

On Thursday, around six at night, we went to an indoor Japanese hot spring. It was pretty interesting, and I enjoyed being there. The water was relaxing and on the whole, Takuma, Shinjiro and 3 of Takuma's friends had a good time in the male hot spring. On Saturday, the first host family day, I went shopping in Kyoto with Holly, Christian, Jeremy and Laura. I had the opportunity to buy so many cool things, and I really wanted to buy more than I did. That experience was very fun, and Sweet Paradise had tasty food. In particular, I liked one of their soups and a kind of cheesy pasta that they had.

Afterwards, I went with Kumiko, Takuma, Shinjiro and Sayaka to Shorinji Kenpo. The workout was longer than what we have at my dojo, but there were breaks in between sections and also a period of time was spent learning about the principles of Shorinji Kenpo. I learned some new fun takedowns, and had a great time learning there.

On the second host family day, we went to go see Osaka castle. Apparently, it was the first time that the Ogawa's had gone to see Osaka castle too, so we all enjoyed it. The castle architecture was beautiful and intricate, and amazing to see in person. The view from the top floor was spectacular! From there, I could see most of Osaka. We started at the top and walked down the 5-6 floors of the castle. Inside, the entire castle had been renovated into a modern museum about Tokugawa Ieyasu. I had minimal background information on him because we had studied feudal Japan in school this year, and it was very interesting to learn more about him. In the castle, there was a hologram story of how he became shogun, and there was an English translation next to it of what was going on. On lower floors, you could see katanas, suits or armor, clothing, and other objects belonging to Tokugawa Ieyasu and other important people around that time period.

After that, we went out and ate takoyaki, which are fried balls of dough with a bit of octopus in them and a sauce on top. It was actually pretty good, but very hot. After eating, we had anko, which is a delicious Japanese dessert. While we were eating dessert, I noticed a nice man with a parrot on his head and he would put the parrot on you if you wanted. We did this, and got pictures. We then took the train back to Nagaokakyo, and picked up our bikes. We rode to where Hidenobu (The father in my host family) worked, and then he took Takuma, Sayaka, Shinjiro and I out to eat at a Japanese pizza place.

First, they served us potatoes, and then the pizza. I really liked the cheese potatoes, and was surprised by the pizza. Japanese pizza is more like a pancake made of whatever you want in it (I found octopus in one bite) with many toppings and sauces on top. It involves no crust, and usually no cheese. The first pizza we got, Hidenobu asked me how I liked my pizza, and I said that I liked cheese pizza, so we got a Japanese pizza with cheese on top. It was really good. Then the second pizza came, and Hidenobu did Japanese style toppings. Two types of barbeque sauce, an herb that I couldn't identify, fish powder, and mayonnaise. Luckily for me, I missed picking up my first piece, and the mayonnaise came off. It actually wasn't so bad, but there was too much fish powder.

After dinner, we all biked home. Riding a bike in Japan at night is nothing like riding a bike in America at night. In Japan, it is so quiet that you can hear the bike's wheels turning, and

there are almost no cars on the roads. In America, there is always background noise, and it makes it less pleasant than riding a bike in Japan. I loved every moment of the few times I rode at night in Japan. It just felt peaceful.

The next day, we visited the Golden Pavilion. It was amazingly beautiful, however, I was slightly disappointed that people were not allowed inside. However, it very much worth visiting, and I feel glad to have seen it.

Afterwards, we visited the Manga Museum, which was a bit of a let down. I had been hoping that it would be literally a museum on manga, and have the original copies of popular manga on display. Mostly, however, it was a display of older mangas, most of which I was not interested in. However, I did enjoy the exhibit on monster manga. After the museum, we went to eat lunch at this nice restaurant where I had some delicious udon and tempura.

The next amazing place we went to was the Kiyomizu temple, and it was simply gorgeous. The temple is so huge that from one end you have to look across a valley to see the other end. We did not go all the way to the end of the temple, but we did see the shrine that is also within the temple area, and several people tried the "rock of love" thing. Supposedly, if you can make it from one rock to the other rock while blindfolded, then you will find the love of your life, or you will have a good marriage. Everyone gave directions to the person with their eyes closed, so everyone who tried made it. Finally, to end the group activities that day, we were allowed one hour of shopping on the street that led up to Kiyomizu temple. While shopping, I found a store selling nice katana's for a great price, and so I bought one. I also was able to get a male yukata, a few fans, and some nice ice cream. All the sellers there were so nice and helpful, and they really tried to help you find what you wanted. That afternoon when I went home, Takuma and I did karaoke for a while, and then played set with the family. Later, Kumiko took us all out to have Chinese food, and it was really good. I liked the fried rice the best, followed by the gyoza.

The next day, we visited The Samurai Movie Park, which was very interesting. I went through the haunted house, and then watched the samurai performance. The choreography was excellent and I thought when Shaira volunteered and then the samurai sang, "I love you!" it was pretty funny. I got a video of it, which makes me laugh whenever I watch it. At the park, I also bought my ninja costume and got to throw shuriken. After that, we had lunch, got to do a little shopping, and my friends and I fed pigeons. Then we walked up a mountain for about half a mile to reach Monkey Mountain, where we got to be near monkeys and hand feed them. The small monkeys were so cute and there was this huge fat monkey who stuffed everything that people gave him into his mouth without chewing first, and it looked funny. Then Laura, Holly, Byron, Olivia, Abby and I went up to the top (which was not that much higher) and we took pictures of us with Kyoto in the background. What was really funny (sort of scary at the time) was when Byron accidentally made eye contact with a Monkey for too long, and the monkey became mad at Byron and chased him one meter away from where Byron had been standing.

When we were done, we went down the mountain (which was much easier than going up) and took the bus back to the city hall, where Kumiko drove me home. That night, we sang karaoke together, and while Takuma was singing (not the bid goodbye song, luckily) I accidentally fell asleep. The family was considerate enough to leave me sleeping, and kindly put a small blanket over me. In the night, I woke up and went back to Takuma's room, and then slept until morning. On the last day that we were there, Kumiko and Laura and Holly's host parents took us to visit a fox shrine. However, when I was packing my stuff into Kumiko's van, she went back into her house. I had no idea why she was doing this, until she came back out with the small cup

that she had given me to rinse my mouth in. I had originally thought that I was only borrowing it, but she gave it to me, and that was really touching to me. Then we got into the car, and picked up Laura and Holly and their host parents. We then drove to the shrine, which was beautiful. I was amazed by the number of gates in the shrine, and also was amazed by the size of the shrine, which was larger than I had originally guessed. After we were finished with the shrine, the families took us to a supermarket type place for breakfast, and I had ramen, a doughnut and some soft serve. Then, sadly, it was time to go. We drove to where the bus was, and we said our tearful goodbyes. I had a wonderful time in Japan, and I want everyone who reads this to know that.

Now for the part which will be the hardest to write. Here, I intend to write about my host family, and most of it will be saying thank you. Thank you Hidenobu, Kumiko, Takuma, Sayaka and Shinjiro for sharing your lovely home with me. Thank you for letting me live with you and learn about you, in turn letting you learn about me. Thank you for taking me shopping in Kyoto, and also to Osaka Castle. Thank you for letting me join you in lighting fireworks. Thank you for always being there when I was confused or needed help for something. Thank you for treating me with kindness. Thank you for making this visit to Japan a precious memory for me. Thank you Hidenobu for making Korean barbeque. Thank you Hidenobu for sharing the chocolate you brought back as a souvenir with me. Thank you Hidenobu for taking me out to have Japanese pizza. Thank you Hidenobu for learning how to play Set and playing with me. Thank you Kumiko for always driving me wherever I needed to be. Thank you for always making sure I got breakfast, and always having food for me. Thank you Kumiko for arranging for me to be able to talk to and email my parents. Thank you Kumiko for helping me prepare the stew. Thank you Kumiko for helping me with my questions, and helping me settle in. Thank you Takuma for sharing your room with me. Thank you Takuma for always talking to me in English and explaining Japanese words to me. Thank you Takuma for improving your English so we could talk more. Thank you Takuma for helping me make the stew. Thank you Takuma for always playing Wii with me. Thank you Takuma for riding your bike with me. Thank you Takuma for letting me walk to school with you every morning that I could. Thank you Takuma for being my friend. Thank you Sayaka for helping me settle in and always being kind to me. Thank you Sayaka for learning how to play Set with me and playing with me. Thank you Sayaka for learning a little English so that we could talk a little. Thank you Sayaka for always being there. Thank you Shinjiro for learning some English so that we could talk with each other a little bit. Thank you Shinjiro for learning to play Set with me and playing it with me. Thank you Shinjiro for being kind to me. Each and every word that I just wrote, I mean. Going places and doing amazing things in Japan were great, but getting to know and being with my host family was the best by far. The thing that I will miss the most about Japan is not its beautiful scenery, its temples, or its shrines. It is you. With this paragraph, I not only say thank you, but also goodbye. I can promise that if I ever visit Japan again and I can come visit you, I will. I would have liked to stay for longer, but eventually, all good things must come to an end. So with this writing, I say goodbye, and thank you.

My stay in Japan has been one of the best things of my life, and it always makes me feel good to know that I have friends in another country. Someday, I will return, and I will meet all my friends again. Until then I still have many, many precious memories to live with. It has taken me a long time to write this, but I am proud with how it turned out. I have been editing and changing this paper so many times, and now I have the final version. If I had the chance to change one thing about my trip, it would be to be able to speak fluent Japanese so that I could talk to Sayaka and Shinjiro. The time spent in Japan has become an amazing memory for me, one that I know will never fade.

Olivia Tyson (9th grade)

I never had a clear grasp on what another culture could really mean: understanding another language, taking in different surroundings and new faces, but most of all experiencing a whole new way of looking at the world. Having the chance to be immersed in Japanese life at such a young age has been so completely different as to seem unreal. Looking back at my many pictures always leaves me with a warm feeling that I can only describe as love for Japan and everything that happened while I was there.

Komyoji Temple, the first temple we visited, was absolutely breathtaking and a magnificent introduction into Japanese culture and history. Everywhere we looked we found something new and exotic to admire. As we scurried up the slippery steps, we passed many bamboo trees, stones with intricate Japanese carvings, and statues of gods. When we reached one of the main buildings we were greeted by a wonderful Buddhist nun who lead us inside. We sat crossed-legged in a circle on a traditional tatami mat and listened to our guide explain the history of Buddha. She passed out sweets and very strong tea and explained the sugar and bitterness of the tea harmonized very nicely together! From there we received a tour of the other buildings around the temple including a room to honor Buddha with exquisite wall hangings and beautiful old furniture, a full-scale sand garden, and many other sights. The whole day provided the perfect introduction to what Japan had to offer, and I was very impressed. We visited many other temples of similar beauty, and got to feed some koi fish! I will treasure the memories of those remarkable shrines forever.

The students of Japan were some of the most mature people I've ever met. Everyone was so smart and polite, and spoke English incredibly well! As our Arlington group cycled through the elementary school classrooms, we had great hands-on experience of a typical Japanese students' schedule. The children were very sweet and always listened to the teacher, which allowed the classes to move quickly. The classroom environment seemed very cheerful but hard-working. I saw continual acts of kindness throughout the day and found my self in awe of the marvelous students. Lively high school students gave us helpful tours and an inside look at their school life. In one school, the principal presented an inspiring slideshow that showed us the school day and the many fascinating sports offered. Water polo, archery, volleyball, and the tea club seemed very popular among everyone. Towards the end of the day some of us tried on traditional kimonos! It was a thrilling experience to feel truly immersed in the culture. We had an enjoyable tea ceremony with some high school girls and took many priceless pictures. Getting such a personal visit to the schools was definitely a once-in-a-lifetime experience not offered to most people visiting Japan.

As amazing as the sightseeing and school visits were, the place I felt most absorbed was at home with my host family. They were unbelievably kind to me and made me feel so comfortable and welcome. My host family mother, Yumi, spoke fluent English so it was very easy to communicate. I will always treasure the long conversations I was able to have with her- it was great to really be able to learn about Japan. Yumi in turn seemed very interested in what I had to say, which made me like her even more, and she was very interesting herself. We had some great laughs together. The grandparents didn't speak any English- but that didn't mean we couldn't communicate! We got by nicely with hand gestures and smiles and the occasional translation from Yumi. By the end of the stay, I felt as though I got very close to them, which was new and exhilarating because the language barrier had been such a big obstacle. They appreciated any Japanese word or phrase I could say, so it was a small but nice way for me to give back a little bit.

Marie, the girl my age, stayed with me in Arlington earlier this year, so it was so special to be able to stay with her and meet her family. With the knowledge we had of each other's families' and way of life, we established a very strong bond. We hit it off the moment we met, and I know we will remain friends forever. Sadly I didn't get to see her very often during my stay- Marie had school and afternoon activities until about nine o'clock every night. But I did get to spend one afternoon with her, and we had a fantastic time chatting and playing on her Wii game system. It was fun to play games that we both knew how to play. I always fell asleep feeling safe and happy- my host family was so loving and fun to be around. Being able to become to close with them was the most cherished aspect of my trip to Japan.

The nine days I spent in Nagaokakyo felt about two days considering how much fun we had. Saying goodbye really hurt- my host family was so wonderful to me and I couldn't bear to leave. The whole visit had been phenomenal in every way. In some ways I was ready to go home though; I was tired and overheated and wanted to get back into my own way of life. But Nagaokakyo felt like another home for me now, and I knew that it would probably be a very long time before I could return again.

On the last night everyone gathered together for a farewell party. There was speeches, present exchanges, and plenty of dancing and food! It was a wonderful way to end our stay there, even though it was somewhat a celebration of sadness, and many people cried. That night as I was packing the last of my belongings I suddenly found myself crying as if I hadn't even realized how sad I was. At one point Yumi saw me crying, and she burst into tears too. She told me how much she was going to miss me, that I was very polite and fun to be around, and she thought I was going to be a great writer when I got older. I felt so happy with her generous words- and I was the one who should be thankful! She had done so much more me in the past week, I found myself crying harder. I thanked her over and over and told her how safe and happy I felt around her family, and that she was always welcome to stay with us if she ever traveled to America. It was then she told me she loved me, and I said I loved her too. That moment was so special I almost break down when I think about it. I owe her and her family so much for everything they did for me, and I will never forget my marvelous memories of Nagaokakyo, Japan. As I reflect on my experience, it is inspiring to think about all the other bonds that have been established between the two cultures over the past 25 years of this sister city exchange program.

Morgan Hopeman (10th grade)

The time I spent in Japan this summer was truly amazing. It really opened my eyes to the differences and similarities between Arlington and Nagaokakako. It was a wonderful experience only enhanced by our host family who we got to know very well during our stay. My mother and I were fortunate enough to get to stay with a host family whose daughter we had hosted previously in the exchange program. Even though we did not do very well at keeping in touch in between the trips I found it easy to catch up and reconnect with her.

The host families in Japan really made the trip special and made all of the students and adults from Arlington feel welcome and at home in this foreign country. I know personally my host family and I interacted by have the daughter try and teach me Japanese. I now have a notebook full of commonly used Japanese words though I fear I could not use them properly even if given the change.

I felt that this was special because we were communicating even though we spoke two

completely different languages and though I am sure that many others on the trip had similar experiences I feel that these are unique to every student on the trip.

There were so many beautiful things in Japan and we visited many breathtaking sights while in Japan. We tried new and interesting food, made new friends, and new memories. But the things I will miss the most now that I am back in the United States is the smiling faces of our host families when I get home at the end of the day.

Holly Everett (11th grade)

During my brief stay in Nagaokakyo, my eyes were open to sundry new experiences, views, and customs, ranging from food, to entertainment, to education. The most salient difference I observed between our two cities and countries was the role, attitude towards, and ideology of religion. In America, Christianity is the dominant religion, where energy is focused on worshiping an abstract deity in order to gain strength, forgiveness, wisdom, or salvation. To me, this attitude always seemed peculiar, as much of it instills an idea of helplessness and dependence on this untouchable entity. Religion in America is a habit; it is practiced as a weekly demonstration of allegiance to God and the Bible. Plenty of positive thoughts and actions come out of these institutions, but I have never been comfortable with the undercurrents of fear-based compliance hidden in some of these organizations. At the same time, I lacked substantial knowledge of Eastern religions, such as Hinduism, Shintoism and Buddhism to reasonably state that I preferred them. Since returning home from Japan, I now feel that I can confidently say that I have found a doctrine with which I am comfortable, even enthusiastic about exploring.

On our first full day in Japan, our group visited Komyoji Temple and was hosted by an English-speaking nun. Speaking in simple terms and succinct, yet universal examples, she radiated a nonjudgmental tone and explained the values of Buddhism with clarity. Ideas such as living in harmony with others and nature, as well as the importance of seeing the sick, old and dying were both thought provoking and refreshing to hear in contrast to a forced confession of sins. In addition, the concept of “nothing is forever” and a strong emphasis on mindfulness, in breathing and living, poignantly struck me.

The tea ceremony in which we participated exemplified mindfulness and allowed execution of the ideas and principles that were discussed earlier. The stoic and precise monks who served and participated in the tea ceremony provided a solid example for following the ritual and enduring the bitter, yet satisfyingly intense Matcha and alternatively sweet Wagashi. Meaning and symbolism was packed into the ritual, as well various structures around the temple. I would hope at some point I could return to meditate at one of many rock gardens and to listen to the mesmerizing chants of the monks in the temple. Although I could not understand the chants of the monks, the tone and exactness was beautiful, as it was intertwined with the sounds of a summer shower and rhythmic drum.

The entire temple was a gorgeous conglomeration of man and earth made designs. The harmony between the building and the surrounding foliage was both simple and elegant. Another prominent fusion present at the temple was of the modern and ancient worlds. While touring the temple, the nun led us down a corridor, where an escalator was installed, as if it were the most normal accessory, alongside a long set of wooden stairs. At first I was slightly off put by its presence and juxtaposition, but the escalator actually made the temple more accessible and did not interfere with tradition or nature. In this way, it made the best of both worlds in a setting predominantly focused on the ancient world.

Visiting Komyoji has been a catalyst for my own engagement in meditation and spiritual thought, leaning in the direction of Buddhism. Many of the simple principles that the nun laid out, I have come to uncover more thoroughly since my time in Japan. Mostly what she taught me was that spirituality should come from within, giving the individual freedom from asking for help from a deity. Buddhism allows for more autonomy and control over one’s thoughts and ways of obtaining peace internally. Some day I would like to return to Komyoji Temple and thank that particular nun, for she has made Buddhism accessible, less foreign, and even appealing to a group of suburban Americans, who may not have been fully aware of the variety of religious and spiritual opportunities available. At least for me, this experience was a defining piece of my cultural immersion in Japan, which will stay with me for years to come.

Christian Fischer (11th grade)

Arlington Students Trip to Nagaokakyo 2009 - Essays

The student exchange trip between Arlington and Nagaokakyo is an intimidating trip, but a wonderful experience that teaches you valuable lessons. Yet it is crucial that anyone going on this trip must prepare properly. From learning basic Japanese to packing to opening your mind and preparing for a very different experience. Gifts are also a vital aspect of the trip as you will exchange presents with your host family you must know the customs ways in which you receive and give your gifts.

Before going to Japan it is crucial to know at least some basic Japanese. For most of the host families only have one or two members that speak any English. So knowing some Japanese is incredibly helpful when communicating with your host family. Also you should learn Japanese pronunciation and special rules so that learning Japanese on the spot is easier and you know how to read any signs or words you see while touring the city. I brought an English to Japanese dictionary and was thus able to better communicate with my host family.

Besides a dictionary I also brought a sheet of paper with common phrases that was extremely helpful in gay to day activities. One should also keep in mind the heat and humidity when preparing to visit Japan. A small towel or hanker chief is very useful just to keep the sweat off of you. Also you do not need to pack much clothing as in Japan laundry is done everyday. But include some nice dress clothes for the banquets and some of the school visits, and very light comfortable clothes for touring the city as the heat can be unbearable. Though after a while you my get use to the heat it takes almost the entire trip to adjust mentally to many of the differences between Arlington and Nagaokakyo.

One huge problem many people had was adjusting to the twelve hour time difference between Japan and the U.S. You just have to try ad tough it out and hope you quickly adapt to the time difference as there is not much you can do about it. However, it is hugely important that you visit Nagaokakyo with a open mind to try and experience the different foods and customs. If you don't you will have a miserable time as there will almost always be situations where you are asked to try something new and different. And the experience becomes so much more special and valuable if you try as many different things as you can. For then you will experience Japanese culture first hand as if you were part of a Japanese family. Maybe the hardest part is figuring out what gifts your host family would like.

When it comes to gifts I would suggest emailing your host family and asking them what kinds of things they like, and that will give you a starting point. Another nice gift is something distinctively New England, or even American that might not be a part of Japanese culture. Food was also very popular gift to give to your host family, especially something that they might not eat in Japan, and gives your host family a sense of American culture. But also keep in mind airport security and what will fit in your baggage. For many people ended up bringing back much more stuff than they brought with them to Japan. From bring back souvenirs and gifts for friends and family to the gifts they received from their host family. So I would suggest to bring an extra bag or to leave space in a suit case for all the things you will bring back from your trip to Nagaokakyo.

Jeremy Fischer (11th grade)

The Nagaokakyo-Arlington sister city relationship is an amazing means for cultural enrichment and social experience. During Our stay in Nagaokakyo, Japan, we visited ancient temples and shrines, experienced Japanese education, had excellent, and often scary food, and saw the bustle of city life in Kyoto. But more than that, we experienced life in Japan on a personal level with our

host families. I was able to share meals, games, sports, and simply the day-to-day flow of life in Japan.

We visited Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines during the trip, showing great insight into Japanese religion and history. We spent a great deal of time in Japanese schools, from the giddy enthusiasm of elementary school to the dedication of high school with countless clubs, groups, and classes. It was truly amazing to understand just how important education is in Japan, an interesting contrast to our own education system in Arlington.

The most important advice I can impart upon anyone who wants to participate in the exchange, is to *try*, may it be food, an activity, or anything else. Don't limit yourself to what you know, or the cultural exchange is lost. You never know if you'll like the food unless you try. Try not to be easily embarrassed about playing a sport, using chopsticks, or helping your host family. And most important is communication; despite the language barrier, if you keep with it the message *will* get across. Don't be afraid to try and say something because you're afraid you'll get it wrong.

Personally, this exchange was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. We truly got to live life from a different perspective, to see how another culture exists with or without components of our own culture. I loved the food and the people, and especially the opportunity to learn some Japanese history. My host family were truly amazing people, who did everything to make me feel comfortable in their home. Meals were great, and free time we spent playing games, visiting the city, playing the piano, and just talking about Nagaokakyo and Arlington. We really had great fun the whole trip, and I will always miss my family in Japan. However exhausted we all were at the end of the trip, I wouldn't trade this experience for anything.

Manon Jean (11th grade)

This trip was a once in a life time event. You don't get to go to Japan every year. Travelling to a new country is always, memorable but what makes this one different? Why is learning about a different culture important? Also how do the people around you affect the trip?

This trip is different because we learned about a new culture, we got to interact with new people and learn about ourselves in the process. I had many different memorable moments on the trip but my most memorable moment was when I was at a restaurant with my host family and their friends. Even though a lot of their friends did not speak English we still had a great time over great food and a lot of laughter. This is my most memorable moment of the trip because it showed that people from different cultures can come together to learn new things and enjoy each other.

The people around me including my host family, students on the trip and everyone else I meet in Nagaokakyo defiantly affected the trip. Most of the people on the trip were people I did not know. During the meetings we were quiet and did not talk to the people we did not know. As the trip progressed I got to get to know them better. After we came home I am still friends with them. My host family was very kind and treated me well. I was never bored when I was there. I did not want to leave so early and was sad to leave. The students and teachers I meet while I was in the schools were nice and fun to talk to. The people, who I meet at the welcome and good by parties, were eager to get to know us and liked taking pictures with us. They were also fun to talk to.

I think that Arlington and Nagaokakyo can learn from each other. Both cities have things that the other doesn't. To help this program we should get students more interested in learning about

different cultures. Many different things I learned in Japan that I can carry in my everyday life, is that we should be more open to different ways of thinking and life styles. Also that going away from home can help you learn more about yourself.

I hope my essay influenced you to go to Japan and to try to travel more often.

Laura Meadows (11th grade)

Upon setting out on the plane from San Francisco to Osaka, I had no idea what to predict or expect. However, when I first arrived at the airport, I could sense the extreme culture change. The airport itself was much quieter and had an overall friendly feel to it than the American airports. The first time I felt the stress of the language barrier was when I was attempting to maneuver my way through the airport to locate my luggage. I did not know where the pick-up location for our bags was, so I asked a worker at the airport. Naturally, I spoke in fast English, to which I did not receive a response other than a cordial smile. Next, I motioned with my hands the outline of a suitcase and pretended to roll one. At this, the forthcoming worker directed me to the luggage.

From this point forth, I was more conscientious about how I communicated with my host family, new friends, leaders, and other new people I met. Although I mostly corresponded with a few English words mixed with body language, I did pick up a couple Japanese phrases and words. Even now, in the United States, I like to use these words not only so I don't forget them, but they sound so different than English words that it is pleasing to hear new sounds. One phrase in particular that stands out is what we said after each meal. It sounded something like "go-te-sa-ma-u-sa-ma-de-shi-ta". Our family tried to teach us this phrase at the first meal and expected us to remember it for the next one. The sounds and the way in which the syllables fit together were just so different than any English to which we were accustomed that it took all nine days, until on the last night we dazzled our family by saying the end prayer bravely and boldly.

Another culture shock was the food we ate during our stay. Not only was the food itself vastly dissimilar from anything on my average daily diet, but the serving sizes, way it was prepared, and the manner in which we consumed it differed immensely as well. While in the United States I am used to eating large portions of only a few different types of food at one sitting, in Japan, we ate smaller portions of several varieties of food. Not only did this introduce a Japanese style of dining, but it allowed us to try a greater variety of foods. There were some foods of which I was not fond, so the vast assortment allowed room to be somewhat selective.

There were some minor differences between the American and Japanese culture that seemed to amaze me the most. For instance, the driving in Japan seemed to be a whole new field of transportation than driving on Arlington streets. First of all, cars seemed a lot smaller on the outside than American cars, and license plates only had four digits, compared to the usual six digit ones in America. Then there was the style of driving which seemed much more precise and accurate than the average reckless drivers to which I am familiarized. Being a passenger in the backseat, it seemed as if we got excruciatingly close to objects surrounding the vehicle. Pedestrians, bikers, sidewalks, plants, and dogs seemed to be within inches of the car. The roads were narrower and filled with more walkers than in Arlington as well.

Perhaps what I will remember most about this trip is the hospitable personalities of the host families and citizens of Japan. Our family catered to our every need and offered assistance to us in any way possible. We were lucky enough to have a delicious meal with our family twice a day, and have an opportunity to converse and learn more about Japanese customs on everyday life.

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Everywhere we went, whether it was the bowling alley, Sweets Paradise restaurant, schools or the grocery store, everybody made an effort to understand our language and culture and adjust to our needs. The only thing I regret about this astoundingly, enlightening trip is that we stayed a mere nine days.